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System Change Agents

A profile of public policy-focused grantmaking foundations

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Introduction

If we are really interested in transformational change and systemic change then we can't bypass the public policy lever. Whether government or school boards – public policy broadly defined – we have to go to where policy is being made in order to change things.
(Foundation 6)

The very fact that foundations can operate independently of political parties, government and public administration creates opportunities for the support of causes that mainstream politics will either bypass or be reluctant to embrace (Anheier, 2005). Others observers have been even more explicit: “The privacy of foundations is a privilege awarded to them because of their contribution to society, not an excuse to ignore the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society” (McIlroy, 1998, p. 101)

Within an ever-evolving philanthropic sector, Canadian grantmaking foundations are well-positioned to effect societal change through innovative tools and strategies and a wide range of roles available to them. While program activities, both direct and indirect, naturally dominate the grantmaking landscape, there is a growing realization by public and private foundations alike that downstream community issues are not isolated from upstream policy and regulatory practices. For example, there is little doubt that policies such as the Registered Disability Savings Plan, carbon taxes (BC), early childhood education, and social procurement policies have made a significant contribution to the quality of life of Canadians.

Grantmaking foundations trying to leverage their influence and improve their impact are increasingly being urged to embrace advocacy and public policy grantmaking as a way to substantially enhance their results and advance their missions. In fact, public policy grantmaking has been described as “one of the most powerful tools available to foundations for creating real change”(Alliance for Justice, 2004 p.1; Coffman, 2008). For example, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Atkinson Charitable Foundation were both instrumental in supporting the movement for early childhood education in Ontario (Turgeon, 2014).

Legally, grantmaking foundations in Canada include private foundations (e.g. family foundations, corporate foundations, faith-based foundations) and public foundations (e.g. United Ways, Community Foundations). These two designations are split roughly 50-50 between the two categories and are distinguished from each other by their source of capital as well as the degree of independence that exists between foundation directors (Imagine Canada & Philanthropic Foundations Canada, 2014). Apart from their legal status as public or private, foundations can be subdivided into several types, including primarily family foundations, faith-based foundations, corporate foundations, and community foundations. The focus here is on both private and public foundations and their engagement in the public policy process.

Empirical analysis by Suárzy and Lee (2011) on 1,400 foundations in the USA indicate that foundations with a legacy of promoting social change and who use the social justice discourse of social change tend to support both civic engagement and community

organizing. Foundations with a progressive policy agenda also tend to embrace grantmaking strategies that build social capital. Foundations that develop networks by growing their boards and by joining professional organizations translate those practices into their giving priorities. That said, the authors also acknowledge that “very little research exists on foundation support for civic engagement or community organizing..” (p. 1130). Similarly, little is known about Canadian grantmaking foundation engagement in public policy. As a result, we have undertaken an initial exploration the nature, scope and impact of the engagement of public policy focused Canadian grantmaking foundations.

Existing research literature reviewed to date has revealed few specific references to the Canadian context. There are some published case studies (Barata & Murphy, 2011; Turgeon, 2014), and numerous reports, but little systematic research. The lack of any systematic exploration of Canadian Foundations in the policy process is itself revealing and certainly speaks to the potential value of this research. There is, in our view, a chronic lack of information regarding either the collective or the individual impact of grantmaking foundations on public policy.

Our operational definition of policy draws on the work of Eugene Meehan (1985), namely that “policy is an actor’s (institutional or individual) guide to the conduct of action, particularly collective action” (p. 293). Within this contextual definition, there is the expectation that the actor has the capacity to produce change, to project future outcomes, to establish indicators of that change, to select a preferred outcome among

available options, to initiate a plan of action, to establish a monitoring and feedback/adjustment system, and has the capacity to operationalize the foregoing (Meehan, 1985). The public policy-focused grantmaking foundations selected for this study meet this operational definition.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to present a theoretical framework that can speak to the larger question of the relationship between Canadian grantmaking foundations, social innovation, and societal change; and to present the findings of in-depth interviews with 13 Canadian grantmaking foundations with an active and sustained engagement in public policy. The article will conclude with some preliminary observations about the state, scope and impact of these policy activities. To do this, we draw on academic literature, foundation websites, reports, and in-depth interviews with public policy-focused Canadian grantmaking foundations.

As this article will demonstrate, there is considerably more to the formulation and implementation of public policy than what reaches the front pages of newspapers or the back rooms of legislatures. There is, we posit, a wide range of roles that grantmaking foundations can play in the public policy process, from engaging or funding primary research to monitoring policy implementation and community impact. While the Canada Revenue Agency stipulates that as registered charities, 10 percent of a foundation's resources can be directed toward political activities, only a fraction of public policy activities can be considered political (Canada Revenue Agency, 2003).

Methodology

Fourteen public policy-focused Canadian grantmaking foundations were interviewed over a period of five months. The foundations were selected as public policy-focused grantmaking foundations, with an active and sustained engagement in public policy if they met the following criteria: 1) independently recognized leaders in a particular field of public policy; 2) an active and sustained engagement in public policy for at least five years; and 3) a commitment of significant resources to achieving a clear and explicit public policy objective. In two cases multiple respondents were interviewed from the same foundation, and in all but one case the president or CEO was interviewed.

A semi-structured interview process was used and transcripts were subsequently analyzed to identify common themes and consolidate responses (Yin, 2009). Following the interview process it was determined that one foundation did not meet the selection criteria and was excluded from the subsequent analysis. The interview information was then triangulated with an analysis of foundation websites, annual reports, documented policy statements, and T3010 data (Canada Revenue Agency, 2016).

The selected grantmaking foundations are engaged in children and youth policy, including early childhood education policy (4), poverty, social justice and economic inclusion policy (5), environmental policy (2), and health policy, including mental health policy (2).

Ten of the thirteen foundations are based in Central Canada and three in Western Canada. Ten of the thirteen are private foundations; and three are public (community) foundations. Collectively, the selected foundations hold \$3.6 billion (CDN) in assets and

\$98.7 million was disbursed to grantees in 2014. The thirteen foundations have a total of 191 staff members, with an average of 14.7 and a range of 4 to 51 employees. These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations collectively have 154 board members, of whom 126 board members operate at arm's-length from their foundation and 28 who do not. The size of foundation boards ranged from 5 to 20 with an average of 11 board members (Canada Revenue Agency, 2016). The average age of these public policy-focused foundations is 47.4 years and the age range is 16 to 74 years.

Theoretical Framework

To frame this article we draw on, and blend, two distinct models of policy analysis. The first is John Kingdon's "Three Stream" model of policy development and the second is Daniel Mazmanian and Paul Sabatier's *Advocacy Coalition Framework*, which focuses on policy implementation. In Figure 1, the first three columns reflect Kingdon's policy development framework, and the last two address phases in policy implementation.

We should note that while this model is based on different streams/stages in policy development, from initial issue identification to policy implementation and monitoring, these streams/stages overlap, and that policy development is not a linear process.

Additionally, we expect to find that foundations are more involved in the first 2 streams.

Finally, our goal here is to list examples from foundations for each of these different stages, but in many cases, a foundation's activities may fit into more than one of these streams (eg. policy research and implementation). Our goal here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of a foundation's activities, but rather, to provide a profile of how various public policy-focused Canadian grantmaking foundations are engage in

different aspects of the policy process in order to “test” our analytical framework and identify areas for future research.

Table 1: Policy Engagement Framework: (Kingdon/ Mazmanian- Sabatier)

Problem / issue Stream	Policy Stream	Political Stream	Implementation Stream	Impact Stream
Policy research and Issue Identification	Policy entrepreneurship and convening	Policy advocacy and issue resolution political action	Policy implementation monitoring and reinforcement	Policy evaluation, impact and renewal

A Five Stream Model of Policy Engagement

John Kingdon’s “multiple streams” approach to framing policy development provides a means to explore the interrelationship of three “largely independent streams”: problems, policies and politics (see Figure 1). The dynamic associated with these three streams and the extent to which they are synergistically linked at a point when a policy window opens determine whether advocates or policy entrepreneurs are in a position to press their positions and to succeed in effecting change (Kingdon, 1995).

The Problem Stream The problem stream addresses the issue of why and how particular problems come to occupy the policy agenda. Included here are focusing events such as crises and disasters, feedback from current program operations, and availability of indicator data.

Foundations have made a significant contribution in supporting community groups, academic researchers and others in identifying the nature, scope and extent of societal issues. Examples of such issues include child poverty, toxic soil, housing for single mothers, First Nations education, food security, social justice, and environmental and climate change impact. Producing sound statistical evidence regarding the extent of a problem helps to legitimize it as a “real” issue that warrants further attention by communities or policy makers, while human stories concerning the impact of such issues are equally important for balancing the statistical narrative. Having the right data is only the first step, albeit an important one. It is the interpretation of this data, not the statistics themselves (Kendall, 2000), and their relationship to existing or pending policy and political developments, which will ultimately determine their policy impact (Kingdon, 1995).

The Policy Stream The policy stream, in which policy alternatives are generated and championed by advocates, has been likened by Kingdon to a policy primordial soup in which a variety of combinations and permutations of ideas float around until the right combination of (1) technical feasibility, (2) congruence with community values, and (3) anticipation of future constraints, is reached (Kingdon, 1995). Some of these policy streams are predictable, such as budget consultations, a pending Throne Speech, or an election cycle, but they can also be triggered by media attention to an issue (e.g. outstanding health and support payments to thalidomide survivors (Chase & Peritz, 2015).

This stream often features the work of “policy entrepreneurs”: those who work to propose a particular policy option and advocate for its adoption. A proposed carbon tax, zoning by-law changes, the preservation of green space, equitable and affordable access to sports, housing, and healthy foods are a few areas where several policy options, incremental or otherwise, can be under consideration at any given time. Any policy option, or steps to support its development, including convening groups, is considered a charitable activity as long as the position is reasoned and takes alternative options into account. If the decision makers are also considering alternative solutions, then analyzing the alternatives is an important contribution to any debate.

The Political Stream The political stream, independent of problem recognition or policy proposals, flows with its own dynamics and rules. Pending retirements, leadership changes, provincial and/or federal elections, and external socio-economic pressures can all foster a political climate that is conducive to change or retrenchment (Kingdon, 1995). However, in a broader context, most of the factors that structure relationships in civil society are, and will likely continue to be, determined by historical and socio-cultural factors and the political dynamic within individual countries (Deakin, 2001). This speaks to the complex challenges associated with sustained policy change.

While the political stream is only one of five policy development and implementation stages outlined here, it is no doubt the most contentious. Political activity issues arise because a foundation or charity can be challenged not only for what they say, but also

how they say it and how much they say. As outlined by charity lawyer Terry Carter in a recent paper on separating fact from fiction regarding political activity by charities:

Despite the stated importance of charities needing to be part of public policy debate in Canada, the federal government's unjustified allegations in recent years about charities purportedly misusing their statutory right to participate in political activities, fewer charities are prepared to enter the risky arena of political activities. This is a regrettable development notwithstanding recent efforts at providing educational resources about what registered charities can do with regard to political activities (Carter & Rains, 2015 pp. 8).

Engagement in political activities is absolutely legal and necessary at points in the public policy process. That's not to diminish the advocacy "chill" that has descended on foundations since the 2012 federal budget. Yet foundations, more than any other registered charity, are independent of government favours and funding. As noted above, foundations, within their 10 percent allowance, are able to engage in political activities. Not only are foundations able to engage in political activities, but it is important to people and communities in need and other registered charities that they do so.

The Implementation Stream The policy implementation stream is the extension of the "Three Streams" model into the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) first introduced by Paul Sabatier and Daniel Mazmanian in 1979 (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979). While beyond the scope of this paper, the ACF provides the opportunity to address the following four policy implementation issues: 1) the extent to which the actions of implementing officials and target groups are consistent with the objectives and procedures outlined in the policy decision; 2) the extent to which policy objectives were attained; 3) the principal factors affecting policy outcomes and impacts; and 4) how the

policy was, or was not, reformulated. In addition, the ACF provides a conceptual framework to address policy implementation issues within a broader socio-economic context.

According to Mazmanian and Sabatier, the crucial role of implementation analysis is to identify the variables that affect the achievement of the policy objectives throughout the entire process. These variables can be divided into three broad categories: 1) the *material* variables associated with the problem(s) being addressed; 2) the *structural* dimensions which influence the implementation process; and 3) the net effect of a variety of *contextual* variables to support the policy [my emphasis]. These three independent variables are applied by Mazmanian and Sabatier to five stages of policy implementation. They have been consolidated across two streams in this expanded policy stream model, namely policy implementation or output and policy impact.

The Impact Stream Beyond the material and structural aspect of policy implementation, a policy needs a periodic political boost to maintain its visibility and relevance in a changing socioeconomic climate. Policy objectives should not be undermined by the emergence of conflicting public policies (Mazmanian et al., 1983). Further, changes in the resources and attitudes of external stakeholders play a role (Mazmanian et al., 1983). Strong intermediary organizations need the membership, resources, and expertise to position themselves as legitimate and necessary participants in the policy implementation process.

Careful and on-going monitoring of policy impact is critical to ensuring that policies are implemented as intended, unforeseen consequences are identified and addressed, and

policy modifications are made in line with contextual changes to ensure on-going compliance and implementation. Foundations can play an important role in supporting the independent and on-going monitoring of successful policy indicators. These indicators in turn can be an important barometer for adequate funding levels, statutory compliance, bureaucratic consistency, political support and sustained problem resolution.

Findings

The analysis of the research findings revealed six policy engagement themes: 1) a migration from program into policy engagement; 2) the utilization of multiple soft and hard policy tools; 3) simultaneous engagement across multiple policy streams; 4) engagement with both systems and agents; 5) engagement in policy implementation; and 6) a long-term policy commitment. These themes will each be addressed in turn.

Migration into policy engagement

While there were some exceptions where a grantmaking foundation was explicitly established with a mandate to engage in public policy, most foundations reported that they migrated into public policy from a growing appreciation of the limitations of a singular focus on program funding.

Here is a typical story relayed by respondents:

It would be fair to say that for most of the foundation's existence it has had no relationship to public policy, nor would it have considered it part of a charitable foundation's function.

The same respondent went on to say:

We started to see that a lot of the work that our grantees were doing on the ground ... had larger structural or systemic implications and in many cases the kind of work they were doing was either hampered, or not amplified as much as it could be by the regulatory and policy frameworks they were working within. And the

way we moved into the policy arena was to start to think about how to amplify what we saw on the ground.

And finally, following a strategic assessment of their role ...

We saw the function of the foundation as serving as a conduit between grassroots innovation/ grassroots work and the larger [policy] frameworks that sat over top of it. And if the foundation could move as a conduit moving up and down that system; and the way we could best do it was to try to pull innovation, perspective, practice, up from the ground, and put it into a sort of framework or analysis that would enable a more conducive environment at a policy/ regulatory level for that work (Foundation 2).

Without exception, the boards of all the public policy-focused foundations interviewed were fully supportive of an active and progressive engagement in public policy. In at least two cases the current CEO was explicitly recruited because of their policy experience, in order to continue, build, or lead a transition into the public policy arena:

I think I would agree that part of the reason they hired me is that [policy] was something I was familiar with and so pretty much as I arrived the decision was that that would be a predominant focus for the organization – supporting policy research (Foundation 12).

Another respondent explicitly called for board approval for a public policy orientation as a condition of their employment: “My one condition was that everyone on the board agrees that public policy would be the focus” (Foundation 5). Yet respondents were also clear that their foundations’ investment in public policy was a way to support their program funding as well as achieve a difference in society that reached far beyond their particular sphere of influence. They also appear less interested in getting credit or profile from their work than they are in seeing a substantive policy change really take hold:

One of the tricky things of course is really around attribution, so I do recall some conversations we had several years ago, where we really wanted to see if there would be uptake around the [strategic approach to issue] with [proposed issue

solution] being the obvious one – but our conversations 3 or so years ago were that there's no way there's the political or public receptivity for a [proposed issue solution], we'll probably have to spend 3-5 years just building awareness, doing the research, getting people comfortable with the idea, and at that point maybe there'd be a point for [proposed issue solution] to be part of the conversation. And now we have 4 provinces and 85% of the population living in areas that are committed to [proposed issue solution]. We don't take credit for that, but I think that we've contributed to the confidence and technical understanding and public awareness around the importance of these things (Foundation 12).

Another foundation realized that the courts, not just policy makers, are a legitimate arena to engage in public policy: The right to an [issue] in the Charter; it's a long drawn-out process. Litigation's not sexy, but we see that as underpinning a lot of the struggles that the [issue] sector is having (Foundation 4).

This same respondent reported that they divide their funding into two categories, one that provides a quick reactive capacity, and the other that is dedicated to “long-term, solutions-oriented” funding relationships (Foundation 4). These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations also fund comprehensive evaluations of their funding partners [i.e. grant recipients] and build a research component into long-term policy initiatives. Foundations do not have a license to print money and they are acutely aware of their limited resources and the need to make their investments count: “They [referring to another foundation] have few resources, but [they] are really, really focused on what kind of impact they can have with their limited resources” (Foundation 1).

There is a clear realization by all those interviewed that engagement in public policy is a tremendous opportunity to make a significant, lasting impact with limited resources: “So if you can use the limited money that the foundation has to influence the way the

government spends its money better, that would give you more leverage than anything else you could do” (Foundation 5).

Utilization of both soft and hard policy tools

Foundations in Canada are in a position to impact societal change and foster social innovation through a variety of tools. These tools include research, surveys, coalition building, direct action, legitimizing and supporting enabling strategies, public campaigns, and a range of funding and policies and practices that are directed at the general public, policy influencers and decision makers (Coffman, 2008). Soft tools in this context have been identified as reputation, independence and legitimacy. Hard tools include convening, funding, quiet diplomacy and collective advocacy. Foundations take advantage of both hard and soft tools as they see fit across the full spectrum of policy stream engagement.

Reputation

Public policy-focused grantmaking foundations are growing more confident about prudently utilizing their reputation to achieve desired policy outcomes:

I would say a) we’re very conscious of political capital and using it wisely but somewhat sparingly in that you don’t want to be the flavour of the month, b) we know that on leveraging money and credibility that often by going first we’ll give governments political cover and/or room to do things they might not otherwise do (Foundation 9).

The same respondent used this example:

We were very involved in that [policy] process, and then stepped up publicly saying that in order to assist the [jurisdiction], which had fiscal constraints, that we provide a match up to \$600,000 over 3 years to help them get there more quickly. In doing that we knew that a) we’d make it easier for them financially, but b) we’d make it harder for them to not follow through. Unanimously.

And I'd say it wasn't lost on a lot of observers that it never would've been unanimous had we not stepped up to the plate. And it may not have carried. So we're conscious that there are ways in which our reputation and some money can really affect the attitude and willingness to step up by others (Foundation 9).

Independence

Policy engagement was typically crafted creatively, taking the full advantage of the degree of independence foundations enjoy:

You're entirely independent in a way that very few institutions and organizations are. And because of that independence – it's advantageous strategically and tactically – but it also provides you with a unique position at these various tables and you're accorded a certain [degree of] legitimacy [too] (Foundation 2).

These public policy-focused foundations are acutely aware that with this freedom comes responsibility.

One of the biggest tools and advantages of a private foundation is its independence. And that's huge. Government doesn't have that, organizations on the ground don't have that. Very few organizations in Canada have true independence and we do. And that makes a big difference. We have to use that well. (Foundation 7).

Legitimacy

Often the question of legitimacy came as a surprise:

It took me by surprise a little bit, how the perception from various sectors is that if a foundation is involved in an issue it is seen as kind of benign and positive and constructive. The fact that we're given that kind of social license as a sector surprised me. I don't think there's something in the fact that because a foundation is a foundation that means that you've earned that [legitimacy], and yet we seem to be given that. So I see that as an enormous benefit because it means that people will often come if you invite them (Foundation 2).

Another respondent had this to say, aware that legitimacy is a contentious issue in other jurisdictions: "It's an interesting one to figure out if we do have that legitimacy, but we certainly think we have credibility and experience" (Foundation 6).

Convening

Convening activities are widespread across all public policy-focused grantmaking foundations interviewed in this study. They convene stakeholders themselves and actively encourage their grant-holders to do the same. Due to their legitimacy and convening power, they are able to bring together groups who might not otherwise connect in an atmosphere of candor and confidentiality.

We have an initiative for engaging policymakers and we've done this for three years in a row. So we convene senior provincial policymakers in [policy issue] for a day-long workshop and so we try to present to them what are the innovations that you can implement in your province to improve [policy issue]. What are the interesting things so that we can help you do your job better. But we of course, we realized that this was an incredible way to get some of our projects in front of these people, to establish relationships. And what we've done too is got together a group of philanthropic organizations, so we invite the senior policymakers and we invite the philanthropic organizations. And we invite some speakers and we get the officials to participate as well. But that was kind of our big, overall policy engagement piece (Foundation 11).

Foundations can create a unique opportunity for convening that is not available in government, and indeed are appreciated by policy makers.

And another tool we're using is the role that we can play as conveners. So we're now meeting with different provincial ministries, and many of them have an appetite to get together. Not the politicians, but the policy makers. There's quite a bit of demand for us convening them – bringing them together maybe once/ year, once/ 18 months. Something a foundation can do that others can't, behind closed doors; it's about understanding who's doing what (Foundation 1).

Foundations fund others to initiate a convening process, but they also engage in it themselves.

[Grant recipient] also does their own convenings with their people, we also as a foundation independently do our own convenings, and a lot of ours are to help us understand what's going on and provide us with ideas so we've gathered together meetings that include former CEOs and deputy ministers, and others... (Foundation 12)

Funding

These public policy-focused foundations fund a variety of initiatives that build a vertical integration of policy initiatives. Local groups are supported to support policy changes at a local level while at the same time provincial and national campaigns or research receive support:

We are among the funders of population-wide type of data collection and studies like [name] a longitudinal study on the development of [issue group], and we are funding a number of other population-wide surveys and studies. We also support an observatory on [issue group] that brings together various data on the state of [issue group] in [province] and the environments in which they grow and we're going to use that as a starting point for dialogue with a number of stakeholders and the population on policy related issues (Foundation 1).

Funding in the public policy arena is not without challenges:

We don't have an awful lot of money. But we do have a really strong board and staff and an organizational culture that is comfortable with risk and ambiguity. And [we are] able to move quite quickly. We see ourselves being most effective at the front-end of issues (Foundation 1).

There are some foundation boards that struggle to differentiate between support for public policy engagement and the policy issue itself:

I've tried to communicate to the board that just because we've funded a report doesn't mean we agree with the content. We're funding their right to participate in a political process... (Foundation 3).

Another respondent was even more specific about their funding commitment to policy engagement:

I'd say that probably 80% of all of the funding – a little over \$2 million/ year in direct grants – have gone toward public policy-oriented activities. And the classic example would be our funding of [policy issue], because it's a high profile national program that has an overall impact over tens of thousands of people for an unlimited amount of time. So our investment of \$700,000 over a 3-4 year period, which now shows that there's well over \$2 billion set aside by people who want to help [policy issue], would suggest that it's had a pretty significant impact.

We're not saying in any way – and we're not naïve enough to think – that because we funded these things they happened. On that particular example – notwithstanding the good work that the work did, were it not for [politician] and his championing of it, we'd still be talking about it (Foundation 5).

Quiet diplomacy

The visible features of advocacy and policy engagement receive a lot of attention, often out of proportion to their impact. Virtually all of the public policy-focused grantmaking foundations interviewed for this study engage in quiet diplomacy. Some of their quiet diplomacy comes in the form of convening activities, often under [Chatham House Rule](#), but where they have ready access to political leaders; they are not shy about making contact. More often though, they are fully aware that policy change will require a commitment that outlasts the tenure of any given politician and that the support of policy makers is critical.

.... I think we really pick and choose how often we're out in front, deputing publicly, vs. how often we support others to do this, but we are quietly inside government (Foundation 13).

... a lot of research that's been funded over the years (we work in the area of [policy issue] and we have been a really quiet foundation, working behind the curtain (Foundation 6).

Collective advocacy

While all of these public policy-focused foundations fund grass-roots activists and coalitions, there is a new confidence among these public policy-focused grantmaking foundations themselves that manifests itself in very public support for a policy issue.

Here are two examples:

The first is an open letter published on March 11, 2015 in *Le Devoir*. Entitled, “[Let’s Not Lose Sight of the Impact of the Reforms on Social Inequality](#)”, it was signed by the directors of nine Quebec-based foundations: the Fondation Béati, the Fondation Berthiaume-Du Tremblay, the Foundation of the YMCAs of Québec, the Fondation Dufresne et Gauthier, the Lea Roback Foundation, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, the Fondation Solstice, the Women's Y Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. The open letter in *Le Devoir* called for greater awareness by the provincial government of the impact of a proposed provincial austerity program on economic inequality. This was public policy engagement was unprecedented and closely watched by other foundations across Canada.

The second example followed shortly afterward. Buoyed by the release of the first open letter in Quebec, a second open letter was penned by eight foundations focusing on early childhood education. Entitled, “[A Smart Investment in Our Future](#)”, it was released on June 30, 2015 to the media and signed by the Muttart Foundation, the Lucie and Andre Chagnon Foundation, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Lawson Foundation, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Atkinson Foundation.

According to interview respondents, this degree of public collaboration is the direct result of on-going working relationships and the subsequent level of trust that has been built over a considerable period of time. There is also a need for alignment with not only the policy issue itself, but also with the intervention strategy and timing. This is not always

the case. One foundation finds that policy partners don't always have the same degree of flexibility and responsiveness, and another withdrew from a long-term collaboration with a provincial government because they felt their policy objectives were being compromised.

This is how one foundation approaches their decision to go public:

We have a process that we go through, a screening that's called eyes wide open that looks at the risks involved in staking a public position, and what are the stakes of doing nothing. And we're careful that we're not the flavour of the week, we don't do it every time there's a local controversy, but when they're significant issues that will affect the community, we've been fairly assertive (Foundation 9).

In other cases foundations support external collective advocacy, providing the opportunity for indigenous and civic society leaders to have a voice. Respondents reported that this degree of community collaboration also helps the foundations to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the communities in which they have a presence (Foundation 8). In the words of one respondent, "we often think of advocacy as confrontation but actually, advocacy starts with collaboration" (Foundation 1).

The appetite for collective advocacy and collaboration is growing:

I think collaboration is becoming more common in the Canadian foundation effort than it was. More opportunities and active interest than there used to be. [There is] a growing realization among foundations who are interested in social change that their ambitions and aspirations far outstrip their resources. If they want to have the kind of impact they're seeking, they need to think about partnerships, alliances, collaborations (Foundation 2).

Simultaneous engagement across multiple policy streams

These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations operate from an activist rather than a theoretical perspective. While they certainly take advantage of theories that may inform their practice, there is a much stronger orientation toward creating continuous feedback loops and experimenting to see what works in their policy context.

That [funding partnership] created unlikely partnerships that ended up building out their reach to organizations they might not have worked with. [We have a] willingness to experiment. We make them a little uncomfortable, and we get right in there, and we really see ourselves and our role to actively engage in the work we're supporting. And to do whatever we can to ensure that they're reaching their full potential (Foundation 4).

Rather than progressing in an orderly fashion through a policy development process, it is more likely that these public policy-focused grantmaking foundations operate simultaneously across several policy streams. This, we posit, is because these public policy-focused grantmaking foundations are addressing policy systems, and not a policy agenda in isolation of the systems in which these policies either thrive or stagnate. These public policy-focused foundations are as aware of plans and programs as they are of processes that enable them to keep clarifying their intent and strengthening their connection with new people and new ideas. The result is an organization that is as “resilient and flexible as a spider’s web (Wheatley, 2006, p. 155) .

Our board understood the importance of public policy because our vision at that time was to see government about policies, programs and measures favourable to the prevention of [issue]. It was a learning process for us to see that vision and to see how to make it happen (Foundation 1)

This same respondent went on to say:

There’s a huge transition with lots of unknowns and lots of tests. We’re in a very testing type of phase. Moving targets and shifting ground. We’re not blind, but we’re on shifting ground. At the same time it’s an exciting time. As much as

change is disturbing, it's creating all kinds of opportunities. And it's true for policy engagement activities (Foundation 1).

Another respondent confirmed this multi-strategy approach this way:

I would characterize us as very creative and innovative in how we work – I think we look for where there are bases and policy openings – a very deliberate reason why we're working in [issue] – is because that's where the majority of new money in this country is. Government is spending money in this area. And we think that we should be asking: for every public infrastructure dollar we're spending, how are we building community (Foundation 13).

These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations see public policy engagement in the context of complex adaptive systems rather than systematic progress that is reflected in the model outlined at the outset of this article (Stacey, 1995, 2007). In the words of one respondent, “We have purposefully built a robust and multidimensional public policy program around seeking better outcomes for [people with issue] “(Foundation 3). While they keep their eye focused on the public policy outcome, they realize that a complex interaction of systems, knowledge, skill and opportunity each play a role.

Engaging systems and agents

Consistent with the theme of simultaneously engaging in multiple policy streams, foundations exercise their own agency as policy advocates and support others to do the same.

I'm hoping to encourage the philanthropic community to see this as an important issue, at the same time my partner [i.e. funding grantee] is hoping to influence other [issue related] agencies to become part of a cohesive response so they're all working together collectively to improve their chances of making real systems change (Foundation 4).

In other cases the agent was not a coalition of organizations, but individual policy entrepreneurs:

But the most effective model for us was the [program]. [These funded individuals] are typically relationships that [Foundation 2] enters into often with a practitioner to write a very practical paper around an issue or a challenge or opportunity that we see in the sector where there's a way to create a bridge or transition between the kind of grassroots needs or practice, and policy innovation or change....There are two important parts of this [program]: 1. The production of papers, not as abstract papers but as opportunities for action. 2. The other important part is that fellows then become policy resources for the sector more generally... When we saw the impact that that relatively modest investment yielded, we broadened the program across all our program areas (Foundation 2).

This foundation reflects a recommendation in social innovation literature that calls for support for people, particularly those with a strong and passionate sense of calling and an emphasis on changing the rules of interaction (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006).

These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations are acutely aware of the systems in which they operate and the complex relationships that exist both within and between large systems (Waddell et al., 2015).

I think the foundation has had a very good history of being part of system influence, or trying to deploy some of its resources to address root causes. So it's not a new thing, it's an extension of a legacy of many years (Foundation 10).

This perspective was echoed by another foundation:

Conceptually we've embraced the idea that you need to think about the long-term to solve complex issues. Where it's challenging for us is that we have to do that on spec/ faith because we move into that space without long-term commitments from funders/ donors. So we need to make sure we're not making commitments we can't live up to. We've had support from some long-term, major institutional funders that has helped... But overall it's a very iterative and nuanced exercise (Foundation 8).

Engagement in policy implementation

Public policy-focused grantmaking foundations tend to be more engaged in the policy development process, but the research also revealed examples of their engagement in

monitoring and policy implementation. A foundation may reduce its own commitment once a public policy has moved from the margins and garnered broader acceptance, support, and additional funding from other foundations and stakeholders.

This is a sentiment shared by many of the respondents:

We see our job as being early into areas and issues that require attention and resources. We're about enabling that issue to get some light and some people and ideas. But we're never going to be an operating funder, we've got no money and that's not where our real value is. The word catalyst is a good word. We're hoping we can catalyze issues early, and then create the connections, resources, etc. behind it to give it greater scale and weight where all sorts of other important actors [and foundations] are in that space (Foundation 1)

At the same time, these public policy-focused foundations see policy monitoring as a critical role and fund projects accordingly:

The [funded project] will be a systematic illustration of that. It will track very specific indicators over time, to do awareness-raising and dialogue on this. We also fund and use population-wide data that are related to our mission and approaches (Foundation 1).

Long-term policy commitment

For these public policy-focused grantmaking foundations, a long-term strategic partnership is the rule, not the exception. They are not shy about engaging in long-term funding and policy strategy to ensure the best chances that a policy shift occurs:

If we wanted to shift the parameters of how things are done – though not necessarily framed in terms of public policy – and want to bring to attention to various levels of government issues that we're passionate about, then we have to think in terms of a longer-term commitment, we have to shift how we do things, had to seek out partners that are prepared to go the distance with us (Foundation 4).

These public policy-focused grantmaking foundations are prepared to take decades, if necessary, to address deeply rooted societal issues and are aware of the resources, such as

research and funding for networks. Here are two examples of the patience and perseverance required for long-term policy engagement:

So if you're not prepared to be there for the long term, the chances of success are much lower. So we've decided that's the approach we'll take so that's one thing – just showing up for work every day and keeping at it. “Relentless incrementalism” – we use that term (Foundation 7).

We're not naïve, we know that this will take a lot of time. It's very incremental as you know. So I think the board understands that this isn't about changing things overnight, but it will take time, patience (Foundation 6).

Two other features of a long-term policy commitment are focus and evaluation.

Focus, absolutely – you can't be a strong policy interlocutor on 15 issues, you just don't have the credibility, its 1 or 2 areas (Foundation 5).

Because it's a long-term commitment we're making, a decade or more starting in [target location], we know that as we begin to scale the interventions (things like parental involvement, extracurricular support, etc.) that we need to be able to rigorously evaluate (Foundation 9).

While not exhaustive, these public policy-focused grantmaking foundations have demonstrated, in addition to the aforementioned themes, that a long-term commitment to a public policy agenda takes strategic resource allocations, patience, perseverance, focus and rigorous evaluation.

Discussion

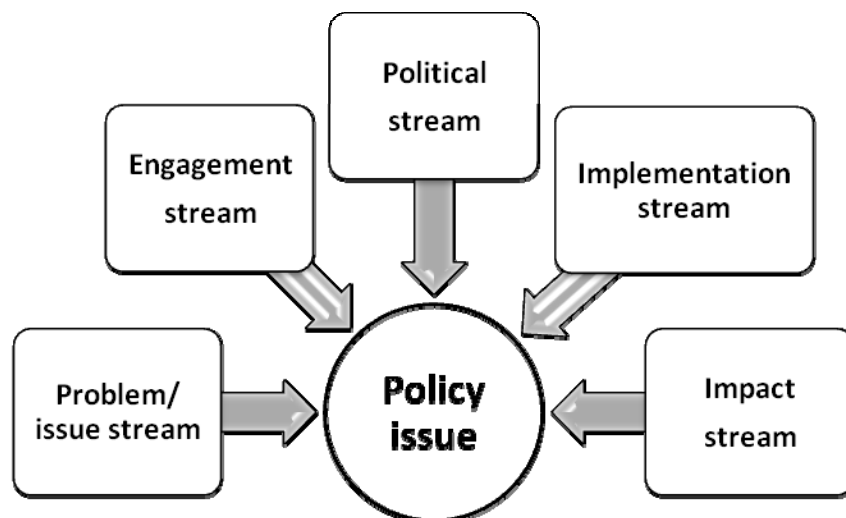
At the outset of this research, the intent was to populate and verify the initial policy engagement framework with input from public policy-focused grantmaking foundations. The result was much richer and complex than what was anticipated, and thankfully so. From a theoretical perspective we have modified the framework (see figure 2), not in content, as that was indeed verified, but in design, as we discovered that these public

policy-focused grantmaking foundations are simultaneously engaged across multiple policy streams. Their engagement is both direct and indirect. They step to the forefront of the public policy arena to be counted and to exercise their experience, knowledge and reputation. At the same time they act indirectly through grant recipients, acting not unlike venture capitalists that train and support the evolution of an enterprising start-up; or by providing substantive and sustainable grants to individuals and organizations that actively engage in the public policy process.

Policy engagement framework

The modified schematic (Figure 2) below presents the range of policy interventions and process elements associated with public policy development and implementation. This revised framework, in our view, is a more accurate reflection of the nature of the engagement of public policy-focused grantmaking foundations.

Figure 2: Modified Policy Engagement Framework



This study has focused on public policy engagement processes, rather than content. While some foundations were launched with a clear public policy mandate; most migrated into the public policy arena when they realized that it was either the best value for their investment of time and resources, or that their community program investments were being thwarted by public policies that hampered their full implementation.

Policy engagement tools

While there are a wide range of public policy engagement tools available to nonprofits, corporations and charities alike (Coffman, 2008), these tools are often focused on their instrumental value to a particular public policy. This research revealed a number of policy engagement tools that that we would associate with public policy system engagement. Funding, convening and network building are clearly a valuable and commonly used policy engagement tools and these foundations are no exception. However, they also include the following as public policy engagement tools: reputation, independence, legitimacy, quiet diplomacy and collective advocacy.

Policy system engagement

The public policy-focused grantmaking foundations studied here appreciate the interconnectedness of multiple systems. They are often working simultaneously at a municipal, regional and a provincial level; particularly where a provincial policy may create a framework for action, but the real policy implementation occurs at a local level. If they are not engaging with these systems directly, they do so through their funding programs. This is where the high degree of policy focus becomes evident. They fund

groups with the dedicated purpose of advancing a specific policy agenda, deliberately choosing organizations or partners as some prefer to call them, who have the passion and capacity to engage in the public policy process. These organizations become long-term strategic partners rather than short-term fund recipients. Some foundations also establish a fund to provide long-term support to individual policy entrepreneurs with a clear alignment to the foundations' policy agenda.

The significant investment by these public policy-focused grantmaking organizations are indeed unique, likely representing less than 0.5 percent of all foundations. There is also a preference to play a catalytic role in policy formulation, rather than replace the work of broader stakeholder groups who have a vested interest in policy outputs and impacts. All the foundations interviewed for this study were engaged in the problem/issue, policy and political streams. Contrary to our initial expectation that foundations would focus their attention on the first two policy streams, what distinguishes these foundations from many others is their investment in political engagement and policy implementation.

Conclusion

This research set out to test a policy engagement framework with a group of public policy-focused Canadian grantmaking foundations. The nature of their engagement in public policy was measured against independent recognition of their engagement, their sustained commitment to public policy engagement, and the significance of their investment of staff, social capital and financial resources.

While well recognized public policy investment tools such as research, convening and coalition building were utilized by all these foundations, they also were prepared to put their reputation on the line; leverage their legitimacy, whether earned or awarded; engage in quiet diplomacy; and where and when opportune, engage in collective advocacy.

These grantmaking foundations engage in public policy for the long-term and have the patience and perseverance to keep their eye on their policy objective while continually monitoring, assessing and adjusting strategies as new information and opportunities come to light. These Canadian grantmaking foundations provide valuable insights into the complex systems associated with public policy engagement.

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